

A Co-operative University - challenging mainstream providers

Cilla Ross and Mike Neary update readers on progress.

Work is ongoing to create a co-operative university, led by the Co-operative College, Manchester.

It will be a federation of independent and autonomous higher education co-operatives in cities across the UK, teaching a range of degree and non-degree level courses, including art and design, humanities, co-operative and labour movement studies, history, counselling and environmental studies. It is envisaged that the number of independent higher education co-operatives will expand along with the courses that are being taught.

Our plan to create a co-operative university was endorsed by Angela Rayner, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education, at the Labour Party Conference in 2019 - as part of the Labour Party's strategy for a National Education Service. She described the co-operative university in socialist terms based on the joint ownership of the production, dissemination and exchange of knowledge.

Why 'co-operative'?

A co-operative is an enterprise run and managed democratically by its members, in this case students, academics and administrators, for their benefit and the benefit of society as a whole, as a community of co-operators. There are affinities between co-operative values and principles and academic culture and practice: a commitment to open and accessible membership, collegiality, collaboration, the centrality of education and

training, as well as the sharing of knowledge and information, and a concern for community.

Our UK co-operative university project is being supported by Mondragon University, a co-operative university established in 1997 in the Basque country in Spain with 4000 higher education students in four faculties: Business, Culinary Science, Education and Engineering, in nine different locations across the region.

Our plans take advantage of provisions in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which encourages institutions to apply for probationary degree awarding powers to challenge mainstream higher education providers. The co-operative university project challenges the hierarchical and managerialist structures that dominate the governance of higher education in the UK.

Democratising higher education

This represents a very practical response to calls to democratise the university. These have emerged many times in recent years - from the student protests and occupations of 2010-2011, the UCU-led USS pension strike in 2018, and the current UCU strike about pensions and pay and working conditions. The plans to create a co-operative university with degree awarding powers has come out of the lessons learned from the free university movement in the UK that emerged after the exorbitant rise in student fees in 2010. Our project to develop the co-operative university relies on

academic research and scholarship into co-operative leadership and management, co-operative teaching and learning, alternative models of funding and an engagement with the theory of critical political economy.

The co-operative university project is bringing to life many of the critiques of the neoliberal university that prevail in the field of critical university studies, and aims to put into practice critical pedagogy and popular education. We have developed a core curriculum to be taken by all students - with a strong focus on the power of collective learning, learning achievements rather than learning outcomes, and the production of socially useful knowledge.

Employability and adult learning

A key feature of our curriculum is a critical engagement with the world of work. Many providers claim to focus on employability, we take the idea of preparing students for work as requiring that we teach students about their rights and protections as workers, and the importance of trade unions and labour movement solidarity based on equality and social justice. The whole project promotes decent and dignified work - as well as research into the future of work for a society in which waged work is becoming anachronistic.

Publicly funded adult education is important to the co-operative university project. This reflects the concerns and ambitions expressed in the recently published report by the Centenary Commission on Adult Education in the UK: *'A Permanent National Necessity . . . ' Adult Education and Lifelong Learning for 21st Century Britain*. Our co-operative university is a case study in the report, recasting co-operative education as open, radical and situated in informal and formal adult and community learning space, so it can meet the needs of learners at all levels.

Co-operative values

There is a world-wide co-operative movement, now with a billion members. In our work we will uphold the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality and equity, and solidarity, that define it. But, more than that, the co-operative university is grounded in the socialistic and communitarian politics of the co-operators who established the first co-operatives in the North West of England in the 19th century.

Co-operatives are a way in which workers can gain some control over their own labour, as industrial co-operatives; and, as consumers, share in the profits of the co-operative retail outlets where members buy the necessities of life. The ambitions of the early co-operators extended beyond ways of ameliorating their harsh living conditions. At the heart of the early co-operators' ambition was a utopian vision to establish models of human association based on new forms of social value or common wealth - not a world dominated by the power of money but a world organised around people's needs and capacities.

The Co-operative College has established an Interim Academic Board, made up of academics, activists, co-operators, student representation and educators committed to creating the co-operative university. This group is applying through the Office for Students for probationary degree awarding powers, working towards a starting date of October 2020.

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